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ABSTRACT

Students in a freshman composition course at William Jewell College write compositions during each class period and discuss their papers in weekly individual conferences with the instructor. The instructor reads the papers during the conferences and then stresses the strengths of the students' writing and points out patterns in the weaknesses. Among the advantages the conference method has over the traditional teaching method are the following: comments are prompt, specific, and individualized; the method saves students' money (it does not require the purchase of a basic handbook) and the instructor's time; and conferences appear to play a part in holding down attrition. (GW)

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Conferences as Evaluative Devices in Freshman Composition

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At William Jewell College, students with an ACT English score of 24 or less, and students with a higher ACT score who fail to demonstrate considerable writing skills in a departmental examination, are required to take a four-hour course in freshman composition. Students in these classes exhibit a wide range of writing abilities--from pretty good to very weak, from occasional spelling errors or awkward word choice to run-on sentences, fragments and massive punctuation problems. I have developed a class which has received favorable student response and which is based on daily writing and weekly conferences. In this paper I would like to discuss some of the benefits of conferences in teaching. The conference component, I believe, allows for maximum student understanding of how to improve writing, it personalizes the class, and it is professionallly satisfying.

Using Gerald Levin's Prose Models, the students write in class every day, that is, four days a week, during the semester, except for a two-week interlude on research papers. The students cover a comprehensive range of rhetorical techniques in the 45-50 papers which they write. Each class begins with a ten-minute review of the one or two, seldom more, paragraphs in Levin's anthology which are intended to serve as models for various writing techniques; and a writing assignment is given--usually one of Levin's, modified toward simplicity and concreteness and away from abstraction, especially at the beginning of the semester. The students then write, using an inexpensive dictionary they are required to buy, and asking me questions as needed for the

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remaining forty minutes. Some students finish in twenty minutes and are free to leave, some write into the next class period if the room is free, some occasionally have difficulty getting started and are allowed to finish the papers out of class.

The students sign up for a ten-minute conference which they come in for at the same time every week during the semester. In these conferences we go over the four short papers written since the last conference, which I read for the first time as the student sits beside me rereading his or her work. At the end of the conference, I assign a grade for the week, with the exception that I do not record the grade for the first week.

In the conferences I have two objectives which are much the same as the objectives in written annotation. I try to develop the student's confidence by stressing the strengths of his or her writing--the effort at humor, the conviction, the novelty of the topic. We all know that we are supposed to "start with something positive," but what is harder to realize is that freshmen do certain things very well in writing, but that they generally do not know it--or at least they forget it when faced with challenges by someone older than they with a gradebook. Students need to be told repeatedly about what they are doing increasingly well during the semester--using specific detail, being honest, being reflective--because students, like teachers, enjoy praise.

Secondly, I try to discover patterns in the weaknesses. Disastrous papers are not simply awful. They are simply afflicted with three or four mortal weaknesses. And if the instructor can reduce the problems to three or four areas, he gives the student something manageable to work on. My objectives in the conferences in general, then, are much like the objectives of written annota-

tion. We all try to praise strengths and to simplify and to categorize the weaknesses. But let me give you my perception of how the conference method helps the student understand how his or her writing can be improved, the personalization which the system offers, and some other reasons for my enjoying the method.

In conferences, my comments are clear to the students. I know, because I can ask them, "Do you understand what I am saying?" which is a question I cannot ask in papers which I annotate and return. All too often in the past the students have not understood the comments, because when they have revised the papers and resubmitted them, the revisions have revealed that the students did not know what I had meant. I can further test how much of my teaching has been absorbed; I can give the students exercises in the conferences to test their use of the principles I have been discussing with regard to their papers. So, first, in conferences the comments are clear.

Secondly, in conferences there is no correction symbol system to be managed by the student. Imagine the complex operation which symbolic annotation requires of the student. It asks the student to look at Agr or Da or Dx or C_1, C_2, C_3, or C_4; to use a page of a handbook to find the label for the symbol--"agreement error," or "Use appropriate diction," or "Use exact diction," or "Comma Error, Type One, Two, Three, or Four"; to locate the page in the handbook where the label is fully explained; to turn to that page and to teach himself or herself how to improve his or her writing by studying that section of the book; and finally to put the new knowledge to work in the next paper. I would guess that the self-discipline and motivation to engage in this

complex operation is just the kind of systematic approach to learning which allows students to test out of composition classes, and that the students who are left in composition classes are not inclined to go through the process. In conferences the students are shown simply and clearly what things need to be done to improve their writing, and the grading process is demystified.

The conference method also personalizes education, which both the students and I enjoy. The method allows me to treat students as people, and enough information on the advantages of personalized instruction is available to argue that case very effectively. Generally, in conferences a student is not told by a shocking maze of annotations, "Be a different person!" On the contrary, the students are shown that writing is a craft and that an apprenticeship to a decent master is a pleasant way to learn the craft. The conference system allows something like mini-tutorials; and it is true that students appreciate concern for them as individuals, in spite of the fact that our college presidents and public relations men say it.

There are several other reasons I, as a teacher, enjoy using conferences. First, the students can write four papers a week and receive prompt and thorough comments weekly; that is, students write more, involve themselves in a greater variety of writing techniques, and still get efficient feedback. Secondly, the conference system gets to the heart of the matter. It allows me to comment on exactly the needs of individual students. Class time is not taken up by my explaining how to correct comma splices when only five students are exhibiting that problem. In the conferences I can discuss fragments and run-on sentences with one student and word choice and clichés with the next.

Third, the system does not waste the student's money on a basic handbook. In spite of criticism about current trends in state requirements for classes in grammar in high school, the students do have not only a native speaker's intuitive competence in the language, but some considerable familiarity with the conventions of writing. Most students at least know enough to make it unnecessary to require them to buy a handbook. What basic mechanical matters different students need to review can be handled by a copy of Perrin's Handbook of Current English, which I have on reserve in the library. I refer students to the Handbook on reserve in order to review specific matters, such as the use of commas. In the case of comma errors, I ask them to list Perrin's rules (about thirteen) for the uses of commas, provide three original sentences illustrating each rule, and return the assignment to me by a certain date. We then go over the rules and the original sentences they have made at the next conference. Sometimes the lesson does not take, but I believe having the students buy the Handbook of Current English would not have helped significantly. In fact, when an error continues to appear after a student is referred to the handbook I am only confirmed in my suspicions about the ineffectiveness of handbooks.

Fourth, conferences save time. I have lost many weekends spending thirty minutes each annotating 1000-word papers, but I no longer need to use my weekends thus. Instead, I set aside forty minutes a day for scheduled conferences with four students, and in those ten minute segments I am able to point out two or three strengths and two or three areas for improvement and to assign a grade. More commentary then that--particularly the highly detailed scrutiny of all the things that could possibly be wrong with

a freshman composition paper--can be a staggering assignment for a teacher and a devastating discouragement for a student.

Incidentally, I think there are some interesting possibilities here concerning class sizes. I would be interested in seeing what numbers of students a teacher can handle effectively with a conference method. I have not been curious enough to volunteer to teach all freshman composition classes at Jewell and to chronicle my behavior under that kind of stress, but someone should take on such a project. My guess is that a teacher in a four-hour system with three courses could most comfortably teach 48 students, or three sections of 16 students. The students would simply write three times a week in class and have one class meeting in which they received the writing assignment, began to write, attended a conference during the class period, and finished the paper out of class. The teacher would not need to schedule conferences at times other than class time.

At Jewell the classes have twenty students, and if I were to teach three sections, I would just schedule a total fo twelve conferences out of class in addition to those scheduled during the class time. In that event, I would be using only two hours a week, or less than thirty minutes a day, for conferences scheduled other than at class time, compared to forty minutes a day now. At schools where the classes are larger and the number of sections greater, an instructor might profitably use the conference system by making the conferences less frequent or by shortening them or by both. I believe there are possibilities here for consideration.

Fifth, finally, and briefly, I think the conferences play a part in holding down attrition. At Jewell the college attrition

rate between the freshman and sophomore year is 15-20 percent. I have taught the course using conferences for four semesters to a total of 80 students, and I have had only one student drop the course. Class attendance is essential and students have very little opportunity to become lax about attendance and eventually to disappear. At the 1975 CCCC meeting in St. Louis, sessions in individualized instruction revealed that schools which used individualized instruction had a lower attrition rate than schools which did not.

Conferences therefore, in addition to accomplishing the same objectives as traditional annotative grading, offer clarity, simplicity. There is no complex symbol system to be learned and used. A personalization of education takes place. Students can receive prompt feedback on a variety of writing assignments. It allows me to deal with special needs of individual students and to save class time for other things. It saves money for the students, it saves time for me, and it saves students for my school.

While the conferences do have several advantages, the course as it is now structured may have flaws. Students forget to come to their conferences and have to be "worked in" the day following. And some students, alas, complain that they would rather not come to conferences every week and would rather not write every single day. My response to the latter lament is to remind them of the motto of William Jewell College--Deo fisus, <u>labora</u>; Trusting in God, <u>Work</u>.